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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER REPORTS ON PRISON CONDITIONS

CLASSIFIED BY: Tracey A. Jacobson, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy Dushanbe, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Fayzinisso Vohidova, a lawyer with the Center for Economic and Legal Support in Khujand, described to PolOff March 29 the horrendous prison conditions, corruption and human rights abuses she saw when she secretly snuck into prison #23 in Khujand, Tajikistan's second largest city.

¶2. (C) Late last year, Vohidova received a letter from inmates housed in prison number 23 in Khujand desperately appealing for her help. The prisoners wanted her to advocate on their behalf to improve prison conditions. Vohidova delivered the letter to the Sughd region's prosecutor's office, but received no response and the office failed to act. The prisoners also sent the letter to local newspapers, which published the letter. After the letter went public, the Ministry of Justice inspected the prisons. Unfortunately after the Ministry of Justice's visit, conditions worsened for the prisoners, according to Vohidova. As a result, they sent a letter to local newspapers rescinding the previous letter in hopes that the prison authorities would alleviate the increased mistreatment.

¶3. (C) In December 2006, Vohidova bribed prison officials to allow her onto the prison compound so that she could see for herself what the conditions were like and speak to the prisoners. The stories the prisoners' relayed and what she saw for herself confirmed rumors about the horrendous prison conditions in Tajikistan.

¶4. (SBU) The prison houses over 900 male inmates crammed into three barracks. Some inmates share beds. The blankets are thin and dirty. The facilities do not have any heat or running water. Toilet facilities are outside. The inmates are fed dry onions, pumpkin and salted cabbage three times a day. Local businessmen provide them these meals as compensation for inmates who work peeling and cleaning onions for the businesses. The unlucky ones who do not work receive hot water and bread. The businesses do not pay wages to the inmates.

¶5. (C) Medicine is not available within the prison, but inmates do have access to a separate medical facility, for a price. Sick inmates, who can afford to pay a hefty bribe (which according to Embassy sources can be up to \$5,000) are

transferred to the medical unit. Even inmates who are not sick take advantage of this opportunity to escape out of the prison system. Once they are transferred to the medical unit, many can further bribe officials to return back to society.

Unfortunately for inmates, even those seriously ill, if they do not have the money to pay the bribe, they must suffer in the prison. Vohidova said that she saw prisoners who appeared to be malnourished, looking thin and sickly. She suggested that many prisoners most likely suffered from various diseases.

Government officials have publicly admitted that tuberculosis is high among inmates.

¶6. (C) Four prisoners also told Vohidova stories of alleged torture. Vohidova pointed out that most of the prisoners subjected to torture and abuse are prisoners convicted of being members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or other groups classified as terrorists by the Tajik government. Having defended some of the convicted alleged terrorists, she said that most of them actually are not members of terrorist organizations, but were framed by the government or were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

¶7. (C) Authorities routinely beat prisoners with sticks. Some inmates have been kept in isolation cells with no food. The four inmates singled out three specific officials responsible for the torture. Ever since the prisoners publicly spoke out against the inhumane treatment, prison authorities have begun to examine phone records to identify which prisoners leaked the information. Prisoners fear retaliation from authorities.

¶8. (SBU) Ambassadors from Tajikistan's Principals' Group (a group of international ambassadors and Heads of Mission) have requested meetings with senior level government officials to discuss prison reform and uninhibited access to prisons for

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international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross as recently as February. However, authorities have not yet granted a meeting.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: Without international monitors such as the Red Cross checking prison conditions, it is difficult to ascertain what is really occurring within prisons, but Vohidova's account paints a horrifying picture. Reports like hers from human rights advocates and anecdotes from local residents are the only sources available. PolOffs' previous meetings with the head of the prison system General Izzatullo Sharipov, a notorious former warlord rumored to be both corrupt and cruel, have not resulted in any increased access. In fact, Sharipov adamantly refused to allow any discussion of the role of the Red Cross in Tajikistan. The authorities' refusal to allow international groups access indicates they have something to hide and may benefit from the corruption -- rumors borne out by the sad story from Khujand. END COMMENT.

JACOBSON